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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the question of why women want children from several disciplinary viewpoints including psychoanalysis; role learning; and economic, political, and religious aspects. Basically, however, childbearing motivations can be divided into four categories: altruistic, fatalistic, narcissistic, and instrumental. Children can fulfill a variety of needs which appear to shift through time and vary among individuals. Particular attention is given to those needs which children seem to meet in our highly technological, impersonal western society, i.e. needs for identity, intimacy, and self-actualization. A crucial concern is how to satisfy these needs without further aggravating the population crisis and without denying people the right to determine their own reproductive behavior. (Author/LAA)

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PSYCHOLOGY, THE POPULATION EXPLOSION, AND THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM AND DIGNITY

The population problem

The world today is facing many crises but one of the most threatening is the population explosion. In the past 200 years population has increased at a rate never seen before. It took all of recorded history upto the 19th century for the planet to achieve the first billion people. However, in only the 100 years from 1800 to 1900 another billion were added. In 1971 the population stood at 3.8 billion and is expected to nearly double by the year 2000. After this date more than a billion people a decade could be added. (Durand, 1968).

Recently Professor Forrester at M. I. T. developed a computer program called "World 2" which is a simulation model of world growth (St. Petersburg Times, December 29, 1971; p. 1-D). He fed in the available data on population, pollution, resources, etc. and made several assumptions based on current knowledge in this area. Based on this, the program indicated that within 50 years there would be a population dieback. Furthermore, the U. S. and other developed countries may suffer more than the undeveloped countries. The dilemma is a four pronged one consisting of: 1) the suppression of modern industrial society by a natural resource shortage; 2) declines in population as a result of pollution; 3) population limitation as a result of food shortage; and 4) population collapse by disease, war, or other social stresses

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caused by physical and psychological crowding. The M. I. T. group concludes that mankind is running a hopeless race to keep ahead of the effects of population and industrial growth. The growth will cease eventually regardless of what we do, but our actions and solutions now help determine in what way it will cease.

The question of what to do unfortunately is easier asked than answered. Answers which have been proposed, however, give an even greater understanding for the difficulty of the problem. Let me cite just one illustration. In India almost two million people are born every month. A proposal was made to initiate compulsory vasectomies of all men with three or more children. When this suggestion was examined, it was found that about 40 million men would be affected. It would have taken 1,000 surgeons or para-surgeons each averaging 20 operations a day five days a week, eight years just to cope with the existing candidates. During this time about 3½ million new candidates each year would have accumulated (Berelson, 1969).

Psychology and population

This may not appear at first glance a problem for psychologists to be concerned with. Yet in many ways it is. Henry David, chairman of the APA task force on population, for example, believes that psychologists need to be concerned with more than the treatment and prevention of mental illness. Positive health reflecting a dynamic equilibrium between man and his environment must also be a concern. Population affects

this equilibrium by causing a rapidly changing way of life that people must adjust to. Tension and anxieties can result from this need for quick, large scale change. (David, 1964).

In a time of impending crisis, there is a real deficit in our knowledge of why women even have children. Yet this knowledge is essential to the whole area of mental health and population. As Fawcett explains:

> "The factors that motivate and direct behavior related to marriage and childbearing constitute the core topic for basic psychological research on population...Whatare the factors that lead most people to choose marriage over non-marriage and children over childlessness...answers to such questions, even partial answers, are an essential ingredient in the design of population policies and programs...the study of population can help build a psychology that both speaks to important social issues and is germane to significant personal events. (Fawcett, 1970; Pp. 104-106)".

Recently using a categorization scheme developed by Rabin and Greene (Rabin, 1965; Rabin & Greene; 1968), I reviewed a large number of studies and theories concerning childbearing motivations. In the short time here, they can only be summarized.

Rabin's fatalistic category is used to denote those reasons expressing the idea that we are brought into the world to perpetuate the species, or that women are just "naturally" mothers. Fatalistic thinking permeates much of the Eastern and Western religious doctrine regarding fertility (Fagley, 1967). Another group with a fatalistic orientation are the psychoanalytic theorists who formulate the idea of some basic biological drive which interacts with childhood events, especially the Oedipal situation, e.g. Horney (1967).

The forces which shape sex role behavior and attitudes about reproduction are so strong that they too constitute at least a partially deterministic philosophy (Cisler, 1970; Weisstein, 1970).

Narcissistic inducements, the second major category, include such reasons as having children in order to reflect in any glory they achieve, proving sexual potency and maturity, or carrying on the family lineage. Wyatt (1967) focused on the identity aspects of motherhood. He states that elements of competence, mastery, and self-actualization are involved in bearingand rearing a child. Pohlman (1969) feels that the need to confirm one's identity may be growing even more important now that male/female roles are less rigidly defined by society. Mothering may be an important token of femininity, especially to women experiencing sex role confusion. Likewise men threatened by equalitarian roles and wishing to maintain their dominance, may try to keep wives in a mothering role. Society's emphasis on youth may be promoting a push towards childbearing in older women (Pohlman, 1969). The baby becomes one more prop in her maintaining a youthful image.

Instrumental reasons are those in which children are used to fulfill some purpose such as keeping a failing marriage together, providing for parents in old age, or constituting a political power base. Another interesting idea (Pohlman, 1969) is that in our modern society babies can provide an "escape from freedom". They enforce a ritual of hard, time consuming work that yields a certain security. Merely by becoming a mother, women can establish a life long identity

which is socially approved. Given a socialization process which fosters a dependent orientation and discourages high academic or career achievement, the ability to accept society's general definition of woman as mother could be a comfort to some women. Instrumental reasons involving political and economic considerations are also important, but perhaps more so in underdeveloped areas.

Finally, altruistic determinants revolve around a liking and caring for children, or the desire to give affection and nurturance. Pohlman (1969) refers to these as the "common sense, Mother's Day reasons for liking children. (p. 60)". Children can be talked with, played with, loved and held, and they tend to make heroes of their parents. They provide a meaning outside of the occupational or civic roles, present challenges, and furnish personal and intimate sources of interaction.

A brief, oversimplified version of the process would go like this. Childbearing motivations reflect a blend of personal desires, societal promptings and sanctions, and possibly biological predispositions. In earlier times and less technological areas, children represented positive economic and political assets, in addition to assuring the continuation of the species. Accordingly people especially through their religions set up prescriptions and role norms which placed heavy emphasis on the duty, morality, and naturalness of women fulfilling the role of mother. These differential role expectations are conveyed from early infancy on and are now widely disseminated through educational institutions and mass media

images. Adding to these factors are the effects of children themselves--the gratifications and joys they bring, the new identity and ego enhancement they give parents, as well as the possibility for exploitation within the family setting.

In contemporary society some of the more traditional values of children are losing their relevance. Machines have now reduced the need for numbers of laborers. The high costs--financial and in terms of time, involvement, and reduction of alternative benefits and opportunities--of raising children appraremtly has made small families more attractive while birth control technology has made them more possible. Furthermore, the potentially disasterous consequences of overpopulation are being realized. All of these conditions should work to decrease society's insistence on and people's desire for children.

Nevertheless, while old forces are decaying, new and powerful pro-natalist motivations have grown. Children provide intimacy, interpersonal relationships, and joy in an era when nuclear families and high mobility have replaced extended families and stable homesteads, and where machinery and other technology has decreased a personal orientation and sense of accomplishment. They allow a conservative security to women who find the crumpling rigidity of sex role behavior and the new opportunities for self-definition disquieting. Childbearing carries out a biological potential unique to women as well. Despite the dire predictions concerning overpopulation, children still serve deep psycholoigcal needs for people.

However, knowing more about these social and personal needs that are met by childbearing gives us a basis for developing new options that provide functional equivalents for children. As Fawcett states:

> "A humanistic answer to the population dilemma of the immediate future may be found not by denying parents children that they have learned to desire, but by offering alternative sources of satisfaction to re-channel reproductive motivations. (Fawcett, 1970;p. 121)".

The question of ethics

The ability to have children and determine their number and spacing has long been considered a fundamental human right. Do suggestions such as the one above abridge that freedom? A more appropriate question would be, "Do we really have that freedom now?" A prominent member of the Population Council gives a thought provoking reply:

> "...the individual couple does not have the information, services, and supplies to implement a free wish in this regard. Such couples are restrained by ignorance, not only of contraceptive practice but of the consequences of high fertility for themselves, their children, and their country; they are restrained by religious doctrine, even though they may not accept the doctrine; they are restrained legally, as with people who would abort a pregnancy if that action were open to them; they are restrained culturally, as with women subject to the subordination that reserves for them only the child-bearing and child-rearing role. Hence, effective freedom in child-bearing is by no means realized in the world today... (Berelson, 1969; p. 8)".

An examination of some of the proposed alternative means of reducing population, also substantiates how preferable it would be to re-channel motivations. Some of these proposals are to add sterilants to the water supply, perform compulsory

abortions or sterilizations, require parents to have a license to beget children, limit the number of children allowed per couple, or to control the quality of those allowed to live (Berelson, 1969).

As Smith (1972) concludes, "voluntaristic family planning is ethically attractive" (p. 12).

> "But as Kingsley Davis (1967) has argued persuasively, efficient birth control as the option of the individual is no substitute for population policy: given people's prevalent wishes for children, it will not limit population though it may reduce its rate of growth in countries where contraceptive information and technology have hitherto been inadequate. So, in the interests of security/survival, some compromise of freedom seems inevitable. People's right to have as many children as they wish must be limited. Or, which is not the same thing, their wishes for children must be modified or manipulated. Exhortation will not do, both because it is usually ineffectual, and because the ethically most responsible would suffer the greatest loss (inequity here!). Coercion in its more blatant forms is ethically unacceptable, a matter of last resort for which the burden of proof must be immense. In between lies the planned manipulation of incentives. (Smith, 1972; p. 12)"

Alternatives

What then are some of the alternatives and planned incentives available to us? I would like to present some under three headings: the legal/policy level, the social norm level, and the personal level.

Several possibilities exist on a legal/policy level. One obvious change would be a liberalization of current laws regarding contraceptive use and information, and abortion statutes. Economists and others have also formulated revisions in our tax structures which now favor increased

childbearing. Financial bonuses for not having children, especially with regard to welfare policy, have also been suggested. On an international level a contingency program in which foreign aid is contingent on some effective population policy within that country has been offered. Berelson (1969) reviews these and other possibilities for those who may be interested.

On a social level a number of shifts are occurring. One change alluded to earlier is the shifting status of women. Promotion of women's role in the labor force (and perhaps in the Armed Forces if the new civil rights legislation passes) and encouragement of higher education should make women more willing to assume roles outside of the traditional marriage relationship. On the subject of marriage relationships, there appear to be changes with regard to this institution as well. The monogomous marriage as we know it today has been said by some to be on its way out. Perhaps group marriages with a sharing of children will occur more in the future. Non-permanent relationships with the childbearing role deemphasized may also become prominent. At any rate there seems to be a greater flexibility in sexual partnerships today than previously.

More options are also available to the individual couple as well. Buckhout's (1972) study indicates that while young people still are somewhat reluctant to adopt children except in cases of sterility, many are at least considering adoption. This trend could be accelerated by emphasizing the social desirability and responsibility of such behavior,

and as many states have begun doing, by actively promoting the adoption of children previously considered hard to place. Group foster homes run by young people, perhaps even unmarried young people, is another potential outlet for re-channeling childbearing motivations. Halfway houses or temporary placements are needed for mental patients, delinquents, abused children, drug offenders, and so on.

Childlessness, which in the past has stereotypically been regarded as a sign of sterility, selfishness, or physical and/or mental maladjustment (Rainwater, 1965), needs to be made more acceptable in the future. Ellen Peck (1971) noting that childless women are frequently subjected to remarks such as, "When are you going to start your family?", has provided a list of one line retorts which childless women may find useful to arm themselves with. Examples are:

Comment: Every real woman wants children.

Response: Every real woman wants a man. (If talking to a woman, follow this one up by glancing in the direction of her husband.)

Comment: There's something a bit unnatural about not having children.

Response: There's something a bit unnatural about (Choose one) clothing, frozen foods, your hair, etc.

This was a very condensed presentation of a very complex, significant topic. The fifteen minutes leaves much unsaid and many questions unanswered, and the issues are relevant to us not only as psychologists but as fellow travelers on the Spaceship Earth.

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